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Culture meets collective action: Exciting synergies and some lessons to learn for the future

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Abstract

In this introduction to the special issue of *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* on “Culture and Collective Action” we emphasize the importance of the special issue topic for the development of the field. Specifically, we highlight the globalization of collective action and the internationalization of the social-psychological study of collective action, both of which point to culture as a missing link for this field. We thus propose that the next step is to move toward a proper *cultural* psychology of collective action—a social psychology in which culture is an integral part. This special issue provides a first step toward such a broad and integrative psychological understanding of collective action, but comes with promises as well as problems. We discuss both the exciting synergies and some lessons to learn for the future, and conclude that a focus on culture will facilitate the development of the rich and fascinating field of the social psychology of collective action.

Keywords

agency, collective action, culture, emotion, identity

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It is clear that demonstrations, strikes, petitions, and other forms of collective action are not restricted to the Western world of dutiful democracy. As a recent example, the Arab Spring protests in Egypt and elsewhere have shown that the very same phenomenon can be observed across cultural boundaries (with other examples including the Black Lives Matter movement in the US and the Gezi Park protests in Turkey). This implies that, independent of the specific culture within which one conducts any study of collective action, individuals can and do find agency in the groups they are part of to change the social structure in which they are embedded. Or can they?

This key question—whether and how culture is relevant to the social psychology of collective action—is at the very core of this special issue. Indeed, after previous special issues on collective action aimed to foster *integration* (see van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009) and *innovation* (see van

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Zomerén & Klandermans, 2011), the current one brings together otherwise isolated research that explicitly links collective action to what seems to be, for this field at least, the undiscovered country of culture. The key reason for this is that we, as guest editors of this special issue, believe that this is an important and new direction for theory and research on collective action to take. We view culture as the (often hidden or implicit) background of shared meaning against which individuals can be understood best (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Smith, Fischer, Vignoles, & Bond, 2013), including their many and different motivations to engage in collective action to achieve social change. Therefore, one aim of putting this special issue together is to raise the question of how culture affects (motivations for) collective action on the scientific agenda.

But there is another, perhaps more pressing, factor that makes the inclusion of culture in the social psychology of collective action almost a necessity. This factor is *globalization*, coupled with the *internationalization* of both the field of collective action as well as its observed manifestation across many different cultures. Indeed, it is our educated guess that we will see more and more studies of collective action that come from different cultures, and at present the state of the field is that we are not equipped to deal with such diversity in theoretical and empirical ways. For this reason, this special issue does not just signal a new and important direction for theory and research to take, but also offers an intriguing and diverse collection of studies of culture and collective action that at the same time raise important questions about our lack of theorizing in terms of culture. Indeed, the inclusion of culture in the social psychology of collective action has much promise but also brings with it new problems.

We hope that the special issue will start this debate in the field, as we feel culture is the “elephant in the room” that almost no social psychologist in the field of collective action talks about. As is evident from the studies in this special issue, once we start talking about culture we will realize

that we need to develop the theoretical tools required to integrate the notion of culture with the social psychology of collective action. In what follows we preview the contributions to this special issue that we hope the reader will find both intriguing and thought-provoking, but most of all fascinating in terms of the many different cultural contexts in which collective action takes place and is studied.

A Preview of the Contributions to the Special Issue

The special issue is divided into three sections. The first two articles focus on *theoretical* aspects of culture and apply them to the broad study of social movements (Jasper, 2017) and the importance of language for culture and collective action in Indigenous populations (Droogendyk & Wright, 2017). The next triad of papers analyse and study collective action *within* (typically national) *cultural contexts*, ranging from Southern Italy (Travaglino, Abrams, & Russo, 2017) to New Zealand (Osborne, Yogeewaran, & Sibley, 2017) and Turkey (Baysu & Phalet, 2017). The final four papers (Chayinska, Minescu, & McGarty, 2017; Fischer, Becker, Kito, & Nayir, 2017; Górska, Bilewicz, & Winiewski, 2017; Gulevich, Sarieva, Nevruiev, & Yagiyayev, 2017) analyse multiple samples *across* (again typically national) *cultural contexts* (i.e., Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine) and also deal with issues such as comparability of samples and measurement equivalence.

Theory

The first section of the special issue consists of two theoretical papers that elucidate the notion of culture in the context of collective action. First, Jasper (2017) provides a timely reminder of the breadth and depth of the notion of culture, which indeed stretches to include all of “the meanings we carry in our heads [and] the physical objects we use to express and embody them” (p. 285). In a wide-ranging paper drawing on decades of scholarship

in social movement studies (e.g., Benford & Snow, 2000; Klandermans, 1997; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001), Jasper considers how cultures reveal themselves in identities and emotions; how they are defined by and manifested in frames, narratives, and leadership; and how they both define and shape the dynamics of collective action across gender, ethnic, religious, or political groups. The scope of the literature review that Jasper provides is impressive, and it is somewhat sobering to reflect how closely the content aligns with that of the social psychology of collective action, yet how closed the two fields have been to each other (see van Zomeren, 2016). We hope this will change.

Second, Droogendyk and Wright (2017) highlight the importance of *language* (as part of Indigenous culture in the Canadian context) for collective action directed at resisting assimilation pressures. Specifically, they suggest that language is an important part of culture as it embodies the past and present of a cultural group. Indeed, these authors suggest that language can be a key aspect of cultural *identity* and other motivations for collective action. Their analysis suggests an important aspect of culture that we would not have been able to theorize about and research further if we were to ignore culture as part of the social structure within which any collective action occurs. As with Jasper's (2017) contribution, the paper highlights that our field would be much strengthened by considering the notion of culture in the study of collective action, and how much it may be related to language as communicating cultural meaning.

Within-Culture Comparisons

The second set of articles focus on within-culture comparisons (typically within nations). Osborne et al. (2017) focus on the society and colonial history of New Zealand and in particular on the implications for the Indigenous (Maori) and non-Indigenous population of the country, in terms of collective action (or the lack of it). Specifically, they test their dark duo model of postcolonial ideology, which suggests two culture-specific ideologies used to negotiate challenges to the

current system. These are *historical negation*, which denies the relevance of colonial injustices to contemporary inequalities, and *symbolic exclusion*, which rejects the use of Indigenous culture in modern representations of national identity. Together, these complementary ideologies thus work against collective action on behalf of the Maori through justifying the current system. Their findings, based on a longitudinal survey of 561 Maori and 4,104 non-Indigenous New Zealanders, show that measures of both of these culture-specific ideologies decrease collective action over time across both samples.

Travaglino et al. (2017) focus on a specific culture within a nation, examining the Southern Italian culture and the phenomenon of Italian criminal organizations. Using a sample of 1,173 Southern Italians, they test their intracultural appropriation theory, which suggests that Italian criminal organizations exploit cultural codes of masculinity and honour to legitimize and lower resistance to their actions. The survey findings indeed show that male-honour-related values decrease collective action against those criminal organizations, which suggests that, like Osborne et al.'s (2017) contribution, culture-specific ideologies are important aspects of culture to take into account when studying collective action.

Finally, Baysu and Phalet (2017) examine opinion-based groups (e.g., McGarty, Blüch, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009) in a sample of 640 supporters and activists in the Turkish Gezi Park protests of 2013. Four groups of protestors were identified using bottom-up latent class analysis: conservatives, moderates, secularists, and liberals. The interrelationships differed systematically across these groups among their grievances, forms of action taken in the protest, support for democracy, and identification as Muslim. For example, secularists and liberals showed stronger support for democracy than conservatives and moderates, in which Muslim identification did not play a role; but among conservatives, stronger Muslim identification was associated with more prejudice and authoritarianism, and lower support for freedom of speech. This contribution thus nicely links different group identities with

cultural patterns of meaning and action that do not rely on geography (such as a nation or a region).

Across-Culture Comparisons

The third and final section of the special issue deals with samples from different (typically national) cultural contexts. Górska et al. (2017) analyse data about the collective action of LGB participants collected from five East European countries (i.e., Croatia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland; $N = 1,365$). After controlling for factors such as country-level democratic governance or religiosity, institutional sexual stigma (considered in terms of rights/legal protection) was associated with citizens' internalized homophobia and lower in-group identification, and via these variables was shown to suppress the collective action of LGB individuals. Thus, this research connects macrolevel aspects of culture with microlevel aspects of culture across different cultural contexts in order to show how important social structure can be in suppressing (but also enabling) collective action.

Turning to the Ukrainian context, Chayinska et al. (2017) examine a sample of over 1,000 Ukrainian adults reacting to the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014. Within the sample, the perceived loyalty of Crimean Tartars to Russia or Ukraine was contested and linked to different constructions of pro-Russia or pro-European Union (EU) political solidarity, and these variables were ultimately linked to participants' own disidentification or identification from Russia or the EU. The authors build on previous work (i.e., Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008) to suggest that political solidarity rests on the shared self-categorization of the unaligned majority with an oppressed group rather than with authorities. Chayinska and colleagues (2017) turn this proposition around, showing that disidentification or rejection of particular authorities can lead third party groups to position or construct disadvantaged groups as oppressed by the same authorities. Doing so serves to construct an emergent solidarity that

legitimizes the group's political aims and creates moral and political leverage, as well as seeking to focus the attention of others to achieve these aims. This is an important step forward in linking the social identity approach—an important social-psychological approach to collective action—to the cultural construction of conflict frames, as different political actors' social identification is changed and constructed for maximum moral and political leverage.

Fischer et al. (2017) study collective action against sexism cross-culturally, employing samples from Germany, Turkey, and Japan. Importantly, they measured two relevant cultural-psychological variables (self-construal and face concerns) that should underlie different responses to blatant sexism across the three cultural contexts (as the countries are expected to differ in general on those variables), but also within the three samples (as individual variance should exist within each cultural context). Although lack of measurement equivalence prevented these authors from directly comparing the three cultural samples, within-sample comparisons showed that female students scoring higher on independent self-construal and lower on face concerns seemed more likely to consider collective action in response to blatant sexism. In fact, those who scored higher on face concerns were less likely to respond with collective action and instead favoured more indirect ways of responding to blatant sexism. These findings suggest that the field of collective action will benefit from importing new concepts from cultural psychology that nicely fit the social-psychological literature on collective action.

Finally, Gulevich et al. (2017) present an analysis of the Ukrainian context, comparing Russian respondents' and Ukrainian Russian-speaking respondents' support for more normative or nonnormative forms of collective action in relation to internal efficacy (perceptions of one's own and one's group's capacity to act) and external efficacy (perceptions of the responsiveness of the system/authorities). Direct comparison of the two samples highlighted that compared to Russians, Ukrainians perceived a less dangerous

and more just world; had higher levels of personal, collective, and external efficacy; and they were more ready to engage in voting, signing petitions, and unauthorized protests. Both groups were equally unwilling to engage in violent protests and moderately unwilling to engage in authorized protests. Furthermore, internal efficacy was found to be associated with more normative forms of action, and lower external efficacy with more support for nonnormative action. Their model takes an important step forward in integrating external efficacy into the study of collective action and, furthermore, their analyses are among the few within the present special issue to address the challenge of comparing both mean-level differences across cultures and analysis of differences in the strength and pattern of associations.

Exciting Synergies and Lessons to Learn for the Future

Across the contributions to the special issue, we want to highlight at least four exciting synergies and lessons to learn for the future. First, the special issue contributions show collectively how *international* both the phenomenon and study of collective action is. This enables exciting opportunities for testing the generalizability of key insights into the social and psychological dynamics of collective action. At the same time, such international sampling immediately raises the issue of *comparability* between different cultural samples, and the theoretical dimensions on which we assume to see differences between cultures. Indeed, although in many cases culture was operationalized at the national level (or as a specific part of a nation), culture does not need to be equated with geography—it is about a shared system of meaning.

Across the board, we believe that the Fischer et al.'s (2017) article nicely illustrates both the promise and problems associated with cross-cultural research in general, and on collective action in particular. The *promise* is that cultural psychology can provide us with new theories and variables and measures that are clearly relevant to

collective action. At the same time, the *problem* associated with this is that we need to make sure that our measures are equivalent across the cultures we derive our samples from, preferably in a structural fashion (i.e., that the same measures have the same meanings in each culture) or at least in a functional fashion (i.e., different measures tapping into the same construct for different cultures). To us this suggests that for any such study it is important to question (and pilot test) the assumptions underlying the measures across the cultures we derive samples from. At the same time, future studies will need to deal with the question of theorizing what any lack of equivalence across cultures implies. If important constructs such as group identity and emotion are experienced in qualitatively different ways across cultures, then how can we integrate culture into the study of collective action?

Second, it is exciting to see the richness of the work on culture and collective action within the field of *social movement studies*, as summarized in Jasper's (2017) contribution. Similarly, Droogendyk and Wright's (2017) contribution is exciting because of the suggested importance of language in a cultural psychology of collective action. Nevertheless, on both counts there is a stark contrast with the empirical praxis in the social psychology of collective action, in which culture and language are rarely considered as variables. Furthermore, in this literature as well as in this special issue, the notion of culture is often implicit and almost hidden in scattered studies on international or interethnic comparisons. We believe that without *defining* the notion of culture, it is difficult to articulate how meaning is constructed within a culture, and how culture relates to the groups that engage in collective action. Thus, another lesson to learn is to develop a shared definition of culture in the field of collective action.

To put our money where our mouths are, we would suggest that a good *working definition* of culture (at least for social psychologists studying collective action) would be "any system of shared meaning that embeds individuals in social structure through their experience and enactment of

their relationships and group identities.” This definition is a psychological (rather than geographical) definition of culture, and offers a clear link between social structure and human agency by pointing to the importance of the experience and enactment of relationships and group identities, and to the importance of a shared system of meaning, in understanding individuals’ attempts to change the social structure through joint action (which is in line with definitions of collective action; e.g., van Zomeren & Iyer, 2009).

Third, a consideration of culture as shared meaning associated with identity implies a clear link with emotional experience, particularly in the context of collective action. Indeed, the centrality of emotion and the blurring of the lines between cognition and emotion—a particular project of Jasper (2017) himself in his article, but also a feature of the relevant research in this area—challenge us to attack the reification of emotions and cognitions. We must move beyond attempts to label one variable a predictor of the other and better understand their entwined cocreation (see also Louis et al., 2016). This is particularly the case because much research on collective action still ignores emotion altogether (also visible in the contributions to this special issue) or struggles to articulate the interrelationships among cognitions and emotions. Collective actions are often experienced as intense emotional experiences and yet in many contributions to this special issue, those experiences are almost invisible. We believe this should change.

Finally, Jasper’s (2017) review of the literatures on leadership, narratives, and frames should remind us that in both fields, arguably—but perhaps even more so within the social psychology of collective action—the leadership processes and contests that are vital to collective action have been underresearched (see Blackwood & Louis, *in press*; Reicher, Haslam, Platow, & Steffens, 2016). This deficit will become more glaring as we seek to theorize the relationship between macro- and microlevel factors (e.g., Górska et al., 2017) and to address the cultural contestation of frames (e.g., Chayinska et al., 2017). Indeed, to us it seems that analyses of

effective leadership and followership in the context of collective action require an understanding of the culture within which individuals are embedded.

In sum, we think the current collection of articles reflects a first step toward a cultural psychology of collective action. This is exciting because of all the fascinating international samples involved and the theoretical contributions that urge us to look at concepts and variables that would otherwise remain invisible. The special issue suggests a strong potential for innovation and integration in the social psychology of collective action. However, every challenge comes with a price, and in this case it seems that including the notion of culture into the social psychology of collective action brings along empirical issues such as cross-cultural comparability and measurement (in)equivalence, together with conceptual issues such as developing a shared definition of culture and incorporating new concepts in the social-psychological literature on collective action. Meeting those challenges will certainly be fruitful in bringing this field yet another step forward in the years to come.

Conclusion

We hope that this special issue contributes to a broader and integrative understanding of the social psychology of collective action. It offers broad and novel theoretical views on why culture matters for collective action, and provides both within- and across-culture (although typically national) comparisons. Furthermore, it illuminates a wide variety of international contexts in which collective action occurs and the broad applicability of theories and models from the collective action literature. Finally, it offers a broader picture of how alive and energetic the field of collective action is, how international and diverse, and is itself a good example of how collective action can bring along change. We believe that this state of the field signals a bright and fascinating future with many exciting discoveries ahead of us, as long as we dare to cross cultural boundaries and are willing to understand and theorize

about the different cultural contexts in which we conduct our research. We look forward to the new insights that a cultural psychology of collective action will bring us.

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